



THE GEORGETOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER FALL, 2013

From the President:

Dear Members and Friends of GHS:

Autumn is upon us. The leaves are turning and there is a crisp chill in the air. Soon we will be putting the Brocklebank Museum to bed for the winter, and the spiders can once again live in peace without the constant threat of the broom. Before long, little ones will be knocking on our doors asking "Trick or treat?!"

Yes, Halloween is nearly upon us, the commercialized remnant of All Hallows Eve and its Celtic pagan precursor, Samhain. As we gear up toward this annual celebration of all things spooky, our fall GHS newsletter peers into some of our more macabre history, from Victorian funeral customs and gravestone carvings to eerie local legends.

So read on.....if you dare!.....

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-legged beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us. (Scottish prayer)*

Christine Comiskey



EARLY FUNERAL CUSTOMS By Christine Comiskey

Is your house over 100 years old? If so, you may be a little unnerved to learn that your home may have been the scene of some wakes and funerals.

When a family member died, a wreath with black ribbon was hung on the front door to indicate that the household was in mourning. Inside, curtains were drawn and clocks stopped. Family pictures would be placed face down, and mirrors were covered with black fabric. The body of the deceased would be cleaned and dressed and placed in a coffin, remaining in the house for usually three days to be sure they didn't "wake." The funeral was sometimes held at the church, but more often in the parlor of the home of the deceased.

The parlor would be decorated with flowers and candles—a tradition that continues to this day. However, before embalming came along, they served a more important role: to mask the unpleasant odor of death.



The body of a prominent Georgetown resident on display in the parlor of his home. (Photo courtesy of Dan Meader)

With the development of embalming, Undertakers became more highly trained professionals, changing their title to "Funeral Director." Many began offering the parlors of their own homes to host funerals, hence the name "Funeral Parlor." With the formal parlors of private homes no longer used for wakes and funerals, they became better known as "living rooms."

If you are interested in finding out if your home ever hosted a funeral, check the obituaries of its former owners. *The Georgetown Advocate*, a local newspaper that ran from 1874-1899 is on microfilm at the library and gives some very detailed information.

MEMENTO MORI (Reminder of death) By Christine Comiskey



In Victorian times, photography was gaining in popularity, but often family members would die without ever having their photos taken. This led to a strange new niche for Victorian era photographers—photographing the dead. The deceased was photographed lying down or propped up, sometimes by other family members who wished to be included in the picture. The photos were often retouched to make the eyes appear open and life-like.

Another way to capture an image of the deceased was with a plaster death mask, although this was more common among famous or wealthy people.

Hair of the deceased was a common keepsake, often made into beautiful and elaborately designed jewelry.



GEORGETOWN'S HAUNTED MEAL CHEST—1781

Moody and Huldah Spofford lived on West Street in Georgetown, along with their large brood of children. They also had a hired girl, seventeen-year-old Hannah Hazen of Boxford, to help with the housework.

One day as Hannah was weaving, she was annoyed by strange sounds coming from the walls of the room, seeming to answer each stroke of the lathe. She noticed a neighbor, Jeremiah Spofford, passing by and asked him to investigate. He found nothing wrong with the loom, nor did he find any loose boards or other explanation, yet every knock of his was answered by a similar one from within the walls. Unable to find a cause, he left.



Disturbed by the sounds, Hannah left her weaving and went to sift flour for baking, but as soon as her skirt touched the heavy meal chest, it moved! As she tried to continue her work, the meal chest kept moving away from her an inch or two at a time. The children soon spread the story around the neighborhood of the strange occurrences in their home, and many gathered to see the spectacle. Everything Hannah touched moved away from her—tables, chairs, even the heavy work bench in the shop. The door latch flew up and down with great rapidity when she touched the door.

Three heavy men, Dr. Amos Spofford, David Thirston, Esq. and Captain William Perley, sat upon the meal chest, yet it continued to move across the room, and upon reaching the corner, began to turn toward the next wall!

Iron was found to help. A fork stuck into the meal chest, table and chairs stopped their movements, a horse shoe hung over the door stilled the latch.

Upon returning home in the evening, Moody Spofford immediately put a stop to all talk about the events and forbade any further experiments in his house. All was quiet the next day, the Sabbath, but when Moody left for work on Monday morning, it started all over again. Moody soon got word that the forbidden events were occurring again in his home, and quickly returned. The ministers, Reverend James Chandler, and his colleague, Mr. Bradford, were summoned to the house. Moody and the ministers did not witness any of the strange events, as they had stopped before their arrival. Though they tried to convince the people that it was just an optical illusion, the twenty witnesses were insistent that the events were quite real. Not wanting to call half the Parish fools or liars, the ministers were obliged to concede the facts, and prayers were offered at the house.

Hannah was dismissed from her job, and from that day on, the furniture in Moody and Huldah Spofford's house behaved as furniture should.

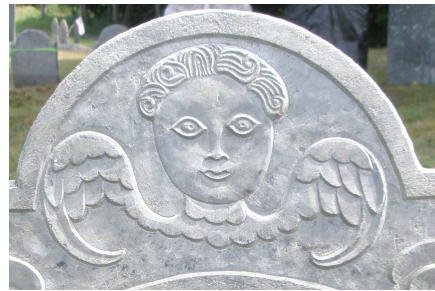
Based on an article by Dr. Jeremiah Spofford (nephew of Moody and Huldah), published in the Georgetown Advocate April 3, 1875. The meal chest of this story is now housed in the Brocklebank Museum.

GRAVE CONCERNS *By Christine Comiskey*

You drive past Union Cemetery all the time, but have you ever entered and wandered around? With burials dating back to 1731, a stroll through Georgetown's oldest cemetery is a lesson in the art of New England gravestone carving.



The Winged Death's Head was the most popular motif on gravestones of the early eighteenth century.



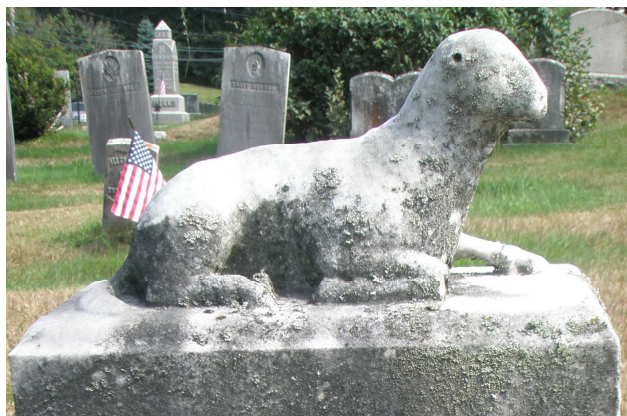
By the later 1700s, Soul Effigies and Portrait Stones became the popular choice.



The Willow and Urn became the most popular choice of the early 1800s.



By Victorian times, gravestones became much more ornate and personalized, such as the pulpit for a minister, obelisks for wealthy and prominent citizens, a lamb on the grave of a child.



CEMETERY TOURS

Do you prefer to learn about local history, or are macabre tales on Halloween weekend more to your liking? Either way, we hope you will join us for one or both of our upcoming cemetery tours.

October 19th and 20th at 2 PM: Join Chris Comiskey for a historical tour of Georgetown's Union Cemetery. Learn about early ministers, slaves and abolitionists, soldiers, and young victims of a tragic epidemic. See the evolution of gravestone carving since 1731 and learn about early burial customs.

October 26th and 27th at 2 PM: Join Chris and the Grim Reaper for a glimpse at the macabre side of Georgetown's history. Hear about witches, ghosts and ghastly deaths, including a murder (and a most surprising murderer!) while touring Georgetown's oldest cemetery.

Both tours will take place at Georgetown's historic Union Cemetery on East Main Street. Cost of admission is \$5.00, with all proceeds going to the Georgetown Historical Society. For more information, contact us at info@georgetownhistoricalsociety.com



A FAMILIAR FACE RETURNS



We are pleased to announce that Michelle Prior has been appointed Interim Curator for the remainder of the 2013 term.

Michelle volunteered with the Historical Society during high school (GHS class of 2009) and returned as a summer intern in 2011. She worked closely with curator Steve Keene organizing the curator's room and designing our Civil War exhibit. The two developed a fond grandfather/granddaughter-type relationship.

Michelle graduated from the University of Miami, Ohio in May with a degree in American Studies and Political Science, and upon returning home, volunteered to work with

us again. We were all very happy to welcome Michelle back, but nobody was more pleased than her mentor, Steve.

Steve's passing has left a void that can never truly be filled, but we are confident that Michelle is more than capable of carrying on his work. We welcome her to the Board of Directors and look forward to working with her. We feel Steve would be very pleased with our choice of his successor.

ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Georgetown Historical Society will be held on Wednesday, December 4 at 7 PM in the Georgetown Library meeting room. We are very pleased to announce that our special guest speaker this year is Georgetown's own Dan Meader. Dan frequently appears on the new Travel Channel show *Dig Fellas*, airing on Wednesday nights at 8 PM. He also works for McInnis Auctioneers and was involved in the much publicized Kennedy auction earlier this year.

We hope you will join us for what is sure to be an entertaining evening. Light refreshments will be served, and GHS merchandise will be available for sale.



BROCKLEBANK FOUNDATION REPAIRS UPDATE *By Frederic Detwiller*



Before and After views show progress on repairs to the collapsed foundation wall.

The Brocklebank Museum foundation repairs began this summer and continue to extend into the early fall. Many of the historical artifacts found in the basement were sorted by volunteers and moved to storage to allow work to proceed. A duplicate ice cutting tool identified by a "Bradstreet" inscription was donated to the Rowley Historical Society, which plans to hold an exhibit on ice harvesting this winter. Larger items, such as a long bobsled and two wooden barrels, were moved to the east ell shop area by able-bodied volunteers whose assistance is greatly appreciated. Work has begun by Advantage Contracting's Dave Kapnis and his crew, including Stickney masons. The obsolete, non-functioning old heating system including the boiler, expansion tank, oil tank and steam pipes have been removed. Once again, we are grateful for the funding of these repairs by the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) and we will continue to give updates as the work progresses.

HELLOS AND GOOD-BYES

We extend our sympathies to the family of long time GHS member Aime Blouin, who passed away recently. We also wish to thank all those who made donations to GHS in memory of our Curator, Steve Keene.

TRAILS & SAILS *By Christine Comiskey*



Our *Trails & Sails* Open House at the Brocklebank Museum on September 22, 23, 28 & 29 was a great success, with 103 visitors! Weekend number two was also *Georgetown Days*, which brought in many Georgetown residents.

Local artist Ed Des Jardins held an art sale in the parlor, donating 20% of his sales to the Georgetown Historical Society. Thank you, Ed!

I also wish to thank the rest of my GHS volunteers who worked at the museum during those days: Terry Hart (who dressed as colonial tavern owner Dudley Tyler!),

Rick Detwiller, Barry Crawford, Michelle Prior, Sylvia Johnston, Karen Brockelbank, Michael Hinchliffe, Brendan Comiskey, and Sarah Comiskey. Thank you also to Georgetown High School students Effie Shilhan, Alex Quinn, and Treighton Madelly, who earned some of their required community service hours by volunteering at the museum. Finally, a big thank you to Ralph Chouinard, whose mowing, trimming, etc. keeps the outside of the museum looking nice and neat all season long.



MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

October 19 & 20: Historical Cemetery Tours of Union Cemetery, 2 PM

October 26 & 27: Halloween Cemetery Tours of Union Cemetery, 2 PM

December 4: GHS Annual Meeting, 7 PM, Georgetown Library Meeting Room





Georgetown Historical Society
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Georgetown Historical Society



OFFICERS

<i>President:</i>	<i>Christine Comiskey</i>
<i>1st Vice President:</i>	<i>Terrance Hart</i>
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<i>Secretary:</i>	<i>Karen Brockelbank</i>
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*Ralph Chouinard, Ed Des Jardins, Rick Detwiller,
Chuck Keilty, Jeff Lamoureux.*

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- VISIT OUR WEBSITE: www.georgetownhistoricalsociety.com to see more information about GHS and upcoming events.
- E-MAIL US AT: info@georgetownhistoricalsociety.com